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AUTHOR Minn, Jay Paul
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ABSTRACT

The pattern drill used in language instruction, termed the "schmattern drill" in this article, is severely criticized for depriving students of meaningful communication opportunities. Methods of alleviating student boredom through the extension of and variation in pattern drill design are illustrated by examples of contrasting "schmattern" and pattern drills. (RL)

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PATTERN DRILL - "SCHMATTERN" DRILL

An Essay on Communication

by Jay Paul Minn

It has been a pleasure to see the state of Indiana improve its language teaching, not only under the auspices of N.D.E.A., but also due to the unique contribution of the Ford Foundation under the able direction of George Smith and Lorraine A. Strasheim. As the years have gone by, I have seen the quality of language instruction in Indiana getting better, and even the worst classes seem less worse now.

But the nation is in a state of turmoil about languages and, indeed, about any academic discipline. Our overpermissiveness, our adoration of youth and its concomitant inexperience, our new rationale of letting students take only what "interests" them or only what is "creative;" all these conditions have led to a state of rapid change, if not chaos, in American education.

All language students and language teachers are terribly busy, and brief contact with all the activity and hot air flowing from the classrooms across the country gives the impression that we are in some kind of heaven with which everyone is in tune. Jaws are working, limbs move, the hosannas are loud -- but something is largely missing: Communication in the target language. This factor alone is helping to put languages under attack. Rightly so, for language learning without communication is no language learning at all.

Language learning was in a state of atrophy B.N.B. (before Nelson Brooks) and is today, A.N.B., in an inarticulate state of complacency, apathy, and withering on the vine. Increasing enrollments don't belie this. What are the increasing numbers of students learning? Why are they attacking language requirements everywhere? I can't answer these questions adequately, but I hope I can explore some possible reasons from inside our discipline. I especially want to concentrate on the pattern drill which, almost everywhere, has become a meaningless "schmattern" drill, a time-consuming chore which doesn't lead anywhere.

This presentation is the result of casual empiricism based on my own years of study, observation of seasoned veterans, practice teachers, etc. Most of what one has to say about pattern drills is based on opinion anyway. Very little serious scientific study has been done on them. Even Nelson Brooks wanted us to swallow his whole methodological pill without asking any questions concerning the disease; we weren't even warned, as is proper with any drug, about serious side effects, like boredom for example. Nor were we told that even with a thorough knowledge of the new methodology, a bored teacher has bored students and an exciting teacher has excited students.

Brooks expounded some very complicated theories, in an often pedantic way, and we were supposed to accept them on faith. We were supposed to have a religious conversion, accept the dogma, and proceed on to some vague Nirvana. But leading a mass of students from ignorance to bliss was based on several mystic assumptions, and, as in the Bible, the text of Nelson Brooks was variously interpreted. Consequently, we still have among us the fundamentalists and the atheists, the halt, the lame, the blind, the converts, the backsliders, and the prophets.

Nelson Brooks came up with some ideas which have proven to be true -- because they work -- and some which have proven to be false -- because they don't work. But, from an historical point of view, Nelson Brooks' extreme ideas were as necessary to language as those of Freud were to psychology. Brooks proposed a relatively novel and decidedly attractive way of saving modern languages in the United States. Until he came along in 1958 with the religion he termed audiolingual, language teaching in the U.S. was certainly dying, and largely through boredom. The students were bored, the teachers were bored, and the administrators were so bored with language teachers that they largely ignored their wishes, opinions, and salaries. If Nelson Brooks did nothing else, he injected some excitement, emotion, enthusiasm, and anger into our field and thus he was largely instrumental in saving it.

The core of what Brooks proposed is the pattern drill. Any language course, on any level, that does not use pattern drills is definitely not audiolingual. The purpose of the pattern drill is triple: 1) to display with real examples the various "ins and outs" of grammatical constructions; 2) to get the students to speak the language as well as to understand the spoken word; and 3) to teach them to read. The old grammar-translation approach was very much like teaching sheet music and theory, without ever feeling the need to touch the piano. Nelson Brooks proposed that we reverse the process and have the students play the piano by ear and imitation for some time, then study sheet music. Brooks even went so far as to claim that the students would understand the sheet music intuitively, without the need for further guidance or instruction. This is a perfectly ridiculous concept except for the very very young. A six-year-old is happy learning languages by pure imitation, without ever stating any grammar rules. A college student is very unhappy with this approach. And in between, some high school students are relatively content with imitation, but many others are already quite analytical in their desire to learn and want to know the why and how of modern language structure. And, unfortunately, a considerable number of high school students couldn't care less one way or the other. Perhaps the greatest challenge each of us faces, no matter what level we teach, is to win over the apathetic student to a real interest in our discipline.

The pattern drill, so basic to language teaching, can be, and is being, terribly abused in many quarters. This is sad when you consider that the pattern drill is the cornerstone of our modern oral techniques. I have seen some exciting things when observing other teachers, and I have also seem some depressing things. But I must say that no language teacher I have seen is so bad that I couldn't learn something from the observation. In fact, almost all my little "tricks" have come from observing colleagues and practice teachers, and have not come from books. Consequently, I feel that too many of our classes are jealously guarded citadels of privacy and that open visitation and discussion would improve language teaching considerably.

The worst abuse of the pattern drill comes in the way many of us use tapes in the lab. How many of us have looked forward to the lab period as a time of rest, where we could throw a couple of switches, start the tape, look busy, and abdicate our responsibility to structure the lab period as carefully as, if not more carefully than, our class periods? The patterns on all the commercial tapes I have heard, and I've heard hundreds, are intrinsically boring, no matter how vivacious or enthusiastic the speakers may be. This situation exists possibly because talking with a tape is inhumane and lacks flesh-blood reality. I have often recommended that each booth in a language lab have a little button; when the student pushes on the button, the button pushes back and makes him feel wanted. I think most of us realize that having a whole 50-minute lab period is a mistake. Lab drills seem to be far more interesting if they are worked into the daily lesson plan and take no more than about ten minutes of class time. The tape should be repeatedly stopped and started with interjections from a live teacher who cares.

Nelson Brooks said one great thing which is startling in its simplicity: students learn to do what they do, and they don't learn to do what they don't do. I use this simplistic statment as an overriding guide to my teaching, and especially my testing. So, if the primary objective for Level I is memorization of dialogues and patterns, then the majority of the work during the year must be memorization of dialogues and patterns, not discussion in English of grammatical principles. If the primary objective for Level IV (if you ever get to Level IV) is discussion of short stories in Spanish, the the majority of the year's work must be discussion of short stories in Spanish, not oral reports in English on the biographies of the authors or the paintings in the Prado. The students learn to do what they do. I don't mean to imply that there is only one objective for each level. As you well know, each objective represents a certain proportion of the year's work. And testing must logically represent the same proportion. If in Level I, oral work represents 70% of the total objective, a silent multiple choice test is violently

out of place and is unfair to the student. What is really wrong with a multiple choice test in languages at any stage is that the test does not in any way, shape, or form represent reality or communication. When you're walking down the streets in Paris trying to find the Opera House, and you ask a Frenchman, "Where is the Opera House?" he is not likely to reply: "1) to the north, 2) to the south, 3) to the east, 4) to the west, 5) all of these, and 6) none of these."

Now to specific items. What I call the "schmattern" drill is not so much the drill itself as the way it is used. I'll give some examples in English (which is a well-known modern language). You might convert the examples mentally into your own target language. Here is a good English pattern drill of the subject-substitution type:

We always used to eat in that restaurant.
You always used to eat in that restaurant.
He always used to eat in that restaurant.
They always used to eat in that restaurant.
Etc.

It can be easily seen that this is so undemanding that it can rapidly become boring. But the structure "used to eat" is extremely important to a foreigner learning English, and the placement of the adverb "always" is another essential item of grammar. This good and useful drill, potentially boring, becomes a "schmattern" drill if the teacher follows this sequence:

Monday. Introduction of the drill, making sure that the students know what the sentences mean.

Repetition of each of the sentences, by the whole class and by individuals, groups, rows, etc.

A substitution drill: we--we always used to eat in that restaurant. You--you always used to eat in that restaurant. And so on.

Tuesday. Repetition of the same procedure as on Monday.

Wednesday. Repetition of the same procedure as on Tuesday.

Thursday. The drill disappears from the lesson plan, possibly forever. The "schmattern" drill teacher then might place this item into an exam a couple of weeks later and will be horrified that the students don't know it.

If all pattern drills, basically good and potentially boring, are treated in this manner, twenty years of such study will be as worthless as two weeks would be. The trouble is that there has been no effort to inject real MEANING into this drill. It has not been brought to bear upon what high school and college students are most interested in: themselves. This way of drilling carries absolutely no communication. It is an esoteric, unreal abstraction, about as exciting as a Latin paradigm. A pattern drill without communication of meaning is a "schmattern" drill. "We always used to eat in that restaurant" has a meaning, but the teacher must extend and elaborate on this simple drill in order to give it a meaning which relates to the adolescent world of the student.

Let's go in small steps through a theoretical extension of this drill. However, the sequence is based on observations of sharp teachers and is partially derived from my own struggles. No textbook extends the drills for us. It is up to us to create the variations, adjusting them to the particular needs of the particular students in the particular class.

The procedure described above is a necessary first step, but only for one exposure:

Monday. Explanation of the meaning of the drill. Pointing out the grammar of what is to be learned. (This is heresy, but it's efficient.)

Let the students hear the whole drill.

Have the students repeat the whole drill, groups, individuals, etc.

Do a simple subject-substitution drill.

Play that portion of the tape which does this drill.

All this at a fairly slow pace perhaps.

Tuesday. Quick repetition of the grammatical principles involved.

Let the students hear the whole drill, but rapidly.

Extremely rapid substitution drill.

Take the verb out and drill it separately, as a substitution drill. We--we used to eat; they--they used to eat, etc.

Add the adverb. we--we always used to eat; they--they always used to eat, etc.

Now back to the whole sentence, very fast pace.

Increasing the pace and varying the focus are the strongest weapons we have against early boredom with pattern drills.

Wednesday. Let the students hear the whole drill, extremely fast, without preamble.

Appoint each student as a different subject for the drill. Proceed to the subject-substitution drill, but point at students to supply the new subject for each utterance. The teacher points at Helen; Helen says "They." The class says: "They always used to eat in that restaurant." Teacher points at Henry, and so on. Checks usually have to be supplied by the teacher to compensate for the erratic pace that develops.

Thursday. The teacher asks the students to listen and presents something like this:

I always used to eat in that restaurant.
I sometimes used to eat in that restaurant.
I sometimes used to sleep in that restaurant.
I sometimes used to sleep in that bed.
I always used to sleep in that bed.
I always used to sleep in that restaurant.
I always used to eat in that restaurant.

Coming home to home base after excursions into the unknown is always comforting to students and teachers alike.

The teacher then indicates that each student can suggest a new word for any part of the sentence, with the class solving the problem. Checks that are to be repeated are quite necessary at this point.

Teacher: I always used to eat in that restaurant.
Class: I always used to eat in that restaurant.
Teacher points at Charles. Charles says: house.
Class: I always used to eat in that house.
Teacher: I always used to eat in that house.
Class: I always used to eat in that house.
Teacher points to Alice. Alice says: sometimes.
Class: I sometimes used to eat in that house.
And so on.

Even sophisticated college students enjoy this type of activity, but so far it is only activity and has moved but slightly from "schmattern" drill toward pattern drill.

Friday. Now comes a payoff, and this depends upon the ingenuity of the instructor. Items must be carefully guided, and the students should be encouraged to make meaningful responses.

Teacher: Listen. I always used to eat in that restaurant. George, did you always used to eat in that restaurant?
George: Yes, I always used to eat in that restaurant.
Teacher: Henry, ask George why he always used to eat in that restaurant.
Henry to George: Why did you always used to eat in that restaurant?
George: Because the waitress was pretty.
Teacher: Mike, do you eat in restaurants because the waitresses are pretty?
Mike: Sometimes.
Teacher: Alice, do you like to eat in restaurants?
Alice: Yes.
Teacher: Why?
Alice: Because there are no dishes to wash.
Teacher: Philip, where do you like to eat?
Philip: I like to eat at home.
Teacher: Frank, ask Philip why he likes to eat at home.
Frank to Philip: Why do you like to eat at home?
Philip: Because my mother is a good kook.
Teacher: Cook. A good cook.
Philip: A good cook.
Teacher: Because my mother is a good cook.
Philip: Because my mother is a good cook.
Teacher: Jane, do you like to eat in the cafeteria?
Jane: No.
Teacher: Why don't you like to eat in the cafeteria?
Jane: The food is terrible.
Teacher: Pamela, do you always eat in the cafeteria?
Pamela: No, I often eat at home.
Teacher: Frances, did you always used to eat in restaurants when you were a child?
Frances: No, I didn't always used to eat in restaurants when I was a child.
Teacher: Why not?
Frances: My family didn't have any money.
And so forth.

Notice that no matter where the little conversation wanders, it ends close to the original pattern, toward which the artful teacher leads. This type of conversation is the payoff of "schmattern" drill, and we have left behind the meaningless and have moved toward communication. I have observed this type of conversation in very excited and exciting classes around the middle of first year high school.

The conversation just presented seems rather elaborate, but with almost any pattern that doesn't have too many syllables the teacher can make an easy first-day move toward communication. For example:

I like potatoes.
You like potatoes.
We like potatoes. Etc.

After the appropriate repetitions, point out the s sound on "he likes," do a subject-substitution drill; then say: "Now I'll ask you whether you like potatoes and you tell me, "Yes, I like potatoes."

Teacher: Do you like potatoes?
Class: Yes, I like potatoes. Check.

Same exchange again, then to individuals.

Teacher: Now I'll ask you whether you like potatoes, and you answer, "No, I don't like potatoes."

Teacher: Do you like potatoes?
Class: No, I don't like potatoes.

Same pair again, down to individuals.

From "schmattern" drill to pattern drill:

Teacher: Now I'll ask you individually whether you like potatoes. Answer the truth. Henry, do you like potatoes?
Henry: No, I don't like potatoes.
Teacher: Joan, do you like potatoes?
Joan: Yes, I like potatoes.
Etc.
Teacher, using old vocabulary items, without break: John, do you like girls?
John: Yes, I like girls.
Teacher: Alice, do you like homework?
Alice: No, I don't like homework.
Etc.

The choice here doesn't seem very extensive, being only yes or no, but it is at least a choice and is a beginning of communication, because the student expresses himself and his own likes and dislikes, while using the target language.

Let me recapitulate. Ordinarily, the textbook pattern drills have an abstract, non-real quality for the average student. The dialogues and drills find pseudo-conversational expression in the warmup as the materials become better and better memorized, and there is a modicum of reality here. But it seems more interesting, as well as more valuable, to carry a pattern drill into some sort of free expression as rapidly as the students gain command of the original drill, so that the student sees clearly how useful or how applicable this particular pattern and vocabulary can be. If he can apply it to his own life, his own interests, he will know the pattern, love the pattern, and take it into the complicated conglomerate of his own family conditioning, his own interests, his own outlook on life. Without planning for and reaching this stage, the teacher is exposing the majority of his or her students to materials which will be easily forgotten and long detested.

The majority of classes I observe do not use the modern language for communication, and I hope that by pointing out devices for converting "schmattern" drills to pattern drills with meaning, I may have helped my colleagues to an insight as much as my observation of my colleagues has helped me.